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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

"...'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"
Acts 20:35 (NRSV)

If you are very fortunate, someone once taught you how to give gifts. Somewhere in your formation experience, if you are fortunate, the wonderful anticipation of Christmas morning began to be related to the gifts you were giving, as well as the gifts you would receive.

I recall it well. I was about eleven or twelve, I suppose. My mother had taken my brother and me to do our Christmas shopping, a fairly simple procedure: big blue work handkerchiefs and razor blades for Dad; inexpensive scarf or department store perfume for Mother. What Dad really wanted, we all knew, was a new pocket watch. He was a railroader and a good pocket watch was standard equipment. I have recalled the memories of that pocket watch, which he used to pull from his vest and wind loudly in church when he decided the preacher had gone on long enough, to my mother's horror and my delight.

Mother had found just the right pocket watch. It was in a jewelry store I had never seen before, on the second floor of a bank building. It was elegant. There was a dark blue carpet all the way up the stairs, and the owner, Mr. Sellers, a very distinguished man about town, waited on us. He knew my mother's name. I was impressed. The object of our search was in the glass case. We looked at it. Mr. Sellers took it out of the case, placed it on a piece of felt on the counter, showed it to us and carefully opened the back to display the works which he assured us were fine. It was expensive. Mother told him we'd have to think about it some more. So down the stairs we went, out onto the sidewalk and she called a conference. "How much money do you have?" she asked me. I had a paper route so I had a few dollars. "And how much do you have?" she asked my little brother who produced a handful of loose change from his pocket. "Good," she said, as she took two or three dollars from me and some loose change from my brother. "Now we have enough." Up the blue carpeted stairs we went. Mr. Sellers was waiting for us and we bought the watch!

What excitement! What anticipation! What an adventure! We could hardly wait for Christmas morning to give it to him. I have since concluded that Mother orchestrated the whole thing. Of course she didn't need our two dollars and change. What a gift she gave us by teaching us a precious lesson about the joy of giving: that the gifts of Christmas are to be given as well as received.

Langdon Gilkey, recently retired Professor of Theology at the University of Chicago, author of some very strenuous academic theology focusing on the interface of science and religion, once wrote:

> "To be enabled to love is the greatest gift that can be given to us, even more enhancing of the strengths of the self, of the depth of its joys, and thus of its reality and its uniqueness than being loved." [*Message & Existence*, p. 203]

And among the more stunning things St. Paul once said is this:

> "In all this I have given you an example that by such work we must support the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, for he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" [Acts 20:35]

The sentence, by the way, is in the 20th chapter of Acts of the Apostles. Paul has been in Rome and is now retracing his steps, traveling east, visiting with the churches he has established, headed for Jerusalem where he half expects to be arrested. That is exactly what happened. So at each port, each stop, Paul is saying farewell to old and dear friends. At the port city of Miletus, the leaders from the church in Ephesus come to see him. Paul had lived for three years in Ephesus. These are good friends and it is at the end of his time with them that he said: "Remember the words of the Lord Jesus . . . 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Blessed means simply happy. It was not originally a pious word. Its literal translation is "carefree wholeness," or "happiness." It is happier to give than to receive. It was Paul's summation of the gospel of God It is an older man, realizing he will not have an opportunity to be with these dear friends again, wanting to make every word count and these are the words he chose. "It is happier to give than to receive."

At the heart of the experience of Jesus Christ, which had turned Paul's life around totally, was a notion which was very different and very new. It was that the essence of God is love, and therefore the purpose of human life is to know love: to receive love and to give love.

That was a remarkable proposal. The Greeks were convinced that God, or the gods, did not have feelings as such: the gods transcended the sort of experience human beings call emotion — happiness, anger, love. The Greeks would have thought it blasphemous to associate God with a human emotion like love. In fact, God, according to Greek thought, was characterized by apatheia, apathy, unaffected, untouched, "the unmoved mover," the god of philosophy is called. Aristotle, at one point, claimed to have proved that God could not be affected, touched, moved by anything. And so the highest goal of religion was for human beings to attain that same apatheia, an intentional detachment from human needs, desires and feelings: a stoic acceptance of whatever happens — no love, no passion, no happiness, no sadness, no laughter, no tears.

The Hebrew-Christian idea that God cares deeply, loves passionately, was a radical notion. Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall writes: "There is no interest in our tradition in God alone. God is God only in relationship. God is means God loves." [*Imagining God.* p. 119] And the corollary: the practical notion that human beings are created to reflect that same passionate caring was in the first century a revolutionary concept.

It still is. The Judeo-Christian proposal is that human beings, created in God's image are created to be lovers and givers: that it is fundamental to our humanity to love and to give.

We know that human beings need love: need to receive love in order to survive. But that is only half of the truth. The other half is that human beings need to give love in order to be human.

The late Reuel Howe put it simply and helpfully:

> "We do not find love by looking for it: we find it by giving it. And when we find love by loving we find God. If someone came to me and asked, 'How can I find God?' I would answer, 'Go find someone to love and you will find God.'" [*Herein Is Love*, p. 45]

What we know now is that the capacity to love is awakened in us as we are loved, by our parents, by significant others, by our spouses, lovers and friends. How does it happen? Howard Rice wrote:

> "The heart of the experience of God is an inner knowing that 'I am loved,' loved beyond comprehension, beyond my earning or deserving."

Unfortunately that is not the way it is for many. For many people, particularly church people it seems, the experience of God is one of judgment, discipline and guilt. The heart of the Christian experience of God is the inner knowledge that "I am loved" . . . the first half of the equation.

But that experience of love is not an end in itself. It is not given simply for our entertainment or to make us feel good about ourselves - that the part of the equation celebrated by New Age Spirituality: religion as therapy, salvation as finally feeling okay about oneself, the phenomenon with which Al Franken and his Stuart Smalley character have such fun on "Saturday Night Live." Stuart Smalley says:

> "I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And, doggone it, people like me."

Howard Rice says we're loved by God because God wants to make lovers out of us. We are given the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ to enable us to become gift givers.

He writes:

> "God is love, and the experience of God's love is one that meets our basic need for love so that we can be free to love others. Spiritual experience is the liberation of the self from preoccupation with itself. It is the beginning of freedom to care about others with abandon." [*Reformed Spirituality,* p. 164-166]

How relevant is it? I would submit that what we are thinking about is nothing less than the salvation of your soul and the hope of the world.

Mental health is not salvation, but Karl Menninger did quip once that money giving is a good criterion of a person's mental health. How happy are you? A good way to answer that is to calculate not how much you have, but how much giving you are doing compared to how much receiving. Albert Schweitzer once advised a group of students who were talking with him about the incredible personal sacrifices he had made to be a mission doctor. Schweitzer told them it was a matter of happiness actually and that they would never be happy until they found a cause important enough to claim everything they had and everything they were.

How relevant is it? Is it merely seasonal sentiment in a world that knows better? Well, I can't think of anything this world needs more than a religion that teaches love and compassion and giving instead of righteousness and doctrinal orthodoxy and the intellectual arrogance that accrues to those who are convinced that they alone have absolute truth. The *Sunday Times* last week published a devastating editorial, "Savage Intolerance." It was precipitated by the destruction of a Moslem Mosque in northern India by Hindu fundamentalists and the riots which ensued and which claimed more than a thousand lives... "in India, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bhotan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka," and the article missed Northern Ireland, Palestine, Sudan . . . "the driving force of armies, guerrilla warfare, human rights abuses and government policy is, increasingly, the power of fundamentalist beliefs. Everywhere reasoned discourse is being replaced by the intolerance of fundamentalism." [*The New York Times,* 12/13/92]

It also happens when Christians are so certain they are in possession of the truth of God that they exclude one another on the basis of sexual orientation, for instance, or over the difficult issue of abortion. Our faith is about love – received and given. Wouldn't the world be more hopeful if religion was devoted to giving gifts of love and not trying to prove its own version of truth?

How relevant is it? In the aftermath of the riots in south central Los Angeles earlier this year, the National Council of Churches sent a team to try to act as mediators between the Crips and the Bloods, two of the major Los Angeles gangs. The team was helpful in arranging a truce which is still holding. They also asked gang leaders what churches could do. Executive Secretary of the Council, The Reverend Joan Campbell, tells, and if I didn't know her personally and heard her tell this I wouldn't believe it, how they assumed the answer would be: organize community centers or arrange low cost loans, start banks and savings and loans — and how stunned the church executives were when the gang leaders said, "Help us get along . . . Teach us how to love each other."

How relevant? With a little more than a week left in 1992, this sad year has shown us all too clearly what a hard place this city is for many of its citizens; a sad and violent city held hostage by a profitable drug trade and gangs armed with semi- automatic weapons — held hostage by the powerful gun lobby. As this year comes to an end, we know that there is a spiritual crisis, a crisis of spiritual courage as well as an educational crisis and a housing crisis and a health care crisis. We know, I think, that people who live here and care about the city are going to have to get back to some basics, like telling the truth about what we have become and basics like love for neighbors, like generosity, like compassion, like the willingness to bear one another's burdens.

I think of all the volunteers who discovered that this year, who have experienced the deep satisfaction of divine love as they tutored a child, or painted a wall, or visited the sick, or cradled a baby. I think of the church and the gift-giving that goes on here all year long; of the sick, homeless man who today has a room and a job and is in occupational therapy because of this church. I think of last Thursday night when parents of tutoring children, the students and tutors gathered to sing carols and give gifts and to hear the story of God's gift of love.

And I think of the Somalian orphans lined up, smiling children of six and seven, singing to the American Marine convoy, "Dearest, you are so welcome." And I think of God and the gift of God's son born in a rough stable, in the middle of a political census, in a little town not far from the busy capitol city.

Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Frederick Buechner's novel, *Brendan,* is about a 6th century Irish saint, Brendan the Navigator, who spent much of his life sailing the seas in a curragh made of wicker and leather in search of a terrestrial paradise — the land of the blessed which he believed lay out somewhere beyond the horizon.

> "He never found it, needless to say, and at the end of his long life, somewhere around the year 580, wondered if he had not spent all those years on a wild goose chase when he might better have stayed home and looked for Christ–like ways to serve."

Brendan meets up with the revered Welsh monk Gildas and they talk. At the end of the interview Gildas stands up to dismiss Brendan. A friend of Brendan's is the narrator.

> "For the first time we saw that he wanted one leg. It was gone from the knee down. He was hopping sideways to reach for his stick in the corner when he lost his balance. He would have fallen in a heap if Brendan hadn't leapt forward and caught him.
>
> "'I'm as crippled as the dark world,' Gildas said.
>
> "'If it comes to that, which one of us isn't, my dear?' Brendan said.
>
> "The truth of what Brendan had said stopped all our mouths. We were cripples, all of us. For a moment or two, there was no sound but the bees.
>
> "'To lend each other a hand when we're falling,' Brendan said, 'perhaps that's the only work that matters in the end.'" [see *Telling Secrets,* p. 87/88]

"It is more blessed to give than to receive," Jesus said.

If you are among the fortunate, someone taught you that along the way. But we are all blessed by that gift of love which was given in the birth of Jesus the Christ, the love that awakens our ability to love: that gift which is given in all the gestures and tokens of affection, given and received in this holy season.

God's love is given in the birth of Jesus the Christ.

God's love awakens our ability to love; to give the gifts of love to one another, to our city, to our neighbors, to our Lord. . . .

Thanks be to God.

We thank you, God of love, for the priceless gift of your son. Now inspire us to give the gift of our love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.